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A Review of Online Grooming: Characteristics and Concerns

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Abstract

The process of online grooming facilitates child abuse and is a threat to young people across the world. This literature review explores the research surrounding how young people are targeted by offenders on the internet. Definitions, prevalence and characteristics of online grooming are addressed in addition to consideration of child sexual abuse theories and internet behaviours. There are a variety of techniques used by internet groomers to manipulate young people (e.g. flattery, bribes, threats) and different ways that young people engage in risk taking behaviour on the internet (e.g. communicating with strangers online, sharing personal information). While models and typologies can aid professionals in understanding the crime, it is important to acknowledge that internet offenders, victims and the dynamic between the two are often unique and varied. This is fundamental to the development of effective preventative education for online grooming and abuse. The review concludes that research concerning the online grooming of young people is limited and calls for further study in this field.

Keywords: online grooming; internet; young people; child abuse; sexual abuse

Online Grooming: Characteristics and Concerns

1. Introduction

The internet has revolutionised many aspects of human behaviour, including the way individuals communicate and interact with one another. Whilst it could be argued that the online environment is just another public space, reflecting the behaviour of its users with both positive and negative aspects of human behaviour manifested online, some evidence suggests that individuals may show different behaviour and personas online compared to direct communication situations (i.e., 'offline'). Such 'disinhibition' may be particularly relevant when considered in the context of online grooming of children and young people. Internet crimes against young people regularly dominate the press and cause anxiety among parents, law enforcement, educators and other child protection experts (Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2011). Therefore, it is important to develop our understanding of online grooming and the key characteristics involved in this type of crime, both in terms of perpetrators and victims. This paper reviews the relevant literature with regard to the online grooming of young people and explores the key themes and issues arising in this area.

2. Online Grooming

2.1. Definitions

The victimisation of young people through sexual abuse was a fundamental focus of study for several decades prior to the existence of the internet (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2005) and grooming is now universally understood as a technique to help turn a sex offender's fantasy into reality, whether online or offline. The term 'grooming' was first

included in UK legislation as part of Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act (SOA) 2003 (McAlinden, 2006), which was applied throughout England and Wales in May 2004. The inclusion of the term was seen as progressive, since it enabled the criminalisation of preparatory acts potentially leading to the sexual abuse of children (McAlinden, 2006). However, the SOA 2003 fails to clearly define sexual grooming and, for example, fails to allow for one person grooming a child for another to then sexually abuse (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2007). Following a review of the literature, Craven, Brown and Gilchrist (2006) proposed the following definition: *“A process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child’s compliance and maintaining the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender’s abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions.”* (Craven et al., 2006, p.297). This definition may apply to a real world setting, or that which occurs online. The behaviour and the purpose of grooming behaviour remain consistent across environments, despite potential variation in specific grooming techniques.

2.2. Prevalence

Following a systematic review of the literature relating to the sexual exploitation of young people online, Ospina, Harstall and Denet (2010) found among research with samples from the general population, between 13% (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006) and 19% (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000) of young people age 10 – 17 years have experienced an online sexual solicitation (Ospina et al., 2010). It should however be noted that not all of these solicitations were from adults and therefore only a proportion of the

solicitations would be categorised as online grooming. Furthermore, this statistic is derived from samples within the United States by the same authors using similar methods.

Across Europe, 60% of parents stated they are most concerned about their young person becoming a victim of online grooming when asked about their concerns regarding inappropriate contact online (European Commission, 2008). In the UK, prevalence figures of online grooming are under researched with the focus remaining on offline abuse (Bebbington et al., 2011; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 2011). One UK study was included in Ospina et al.'s (2010) review which reported that (based on the evidence given by two police services and averaging it to represent the UK population) 2.1% of police cases in the UK each year relate to online grooming (Gallagher, Fraser, Christmann, & Hodgson, 2006). However this statistic is based on cases reported to the police and therefore is likely to be an underestimate considering the low reporting rates for this type of crime. Online grooming is the most reported suspect activity identified by reports received from members of the UK public with 1,536 reports (66% of all reports) received between 1st April 2009 and 31st March 2010 (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre [CEOP], 2010). This indicates the potential prevalence of the crime as well as the public concern surrounding it. There have been efforts to collate and evaluate the research surrounding online grooming (Craven et al., 2006; Ospina et al., 2010) and researchers are beginning to assess comparisons between online and offline grooming. However, at present this issue has been explored to a very limited extent (McAlinden, 2006) and much work remains to not only consider the prevalence of the crime, but also the characteristics and form it may take.

2.3. Characteristics of grooming

It is generally accepted that grooming is multifaceted and complex; recognizing the process can be difficult and establishing where it begins and ends almost impossible (Gillespie, 2004). It is widely accepted that child sex offenders are not a homogenous group (Beech, Elliott, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008; Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; McCarthy, 2010; Ospina et al., 2010; Webb, Craissati, & Keen, 2007) and research increasingly indicates that online groomers are also heterogeneous (Briggs, Simon, & Simonson, 2011; European Online Grooming Project, 2012). Therefore, grooming varies considerably in style, duration and intensity; often reflecting the offender's personality and behaviour.

There are also variations regarding the amount of time reported for online victim and offender communication, although it often takes a young person a while to feel comfortable and therefore the offender may be required to groom over a longer period of time (McAlinden, 2006). Following interviews with 33 online groomers, accounts of time frames varied from seconds, minutes, days, months and even years (European Online Grooming Project, 2012); no average timeframe was identified, but this variation in period is supported by other research (Craven et al., 2007; O'Connell, 2003). Based on a sample of 129 sexual offences against adolescents which began online, Wolak, Finkelhor and Mitchell (2004) found that 64% of offenders communicated for more than one month with their victim. In contrast, Briggs et al. (2011) noted that in a sample of 51 internet-initiated sex offenders, 70% communicated for less than a week and 40% for less than 24 hours before arranging to meet. Notably, the figures from the Briggs et al. (2011) study represent offenders that were categorised as contact driven rather than fantasy driven; therefore it is

likely that grooming time was reduced as their goal was to meet the young person. In contrast, those offenders categorised as fantasy driven were found to communicate online with victims for an average of 32.9 days, with the maximum relationship lasting 180 days (Briggs et al., 2011), which is more comparable with the Wolak et al. (2004) study. Contact driven offenders are more likely to envisage grooming as a necessary method leading to the opportunity of contact, whereas fantasy driven offenders may be more satisfied by the grooming itself. Thus, the notion that internet offenders have different goals is becoming widely accepted within research (Briggs et al., 2011; Elliott & Beech, 2009; European Online Grooming Project, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2006).

With regard to the process of grooming off-line, Finkelhor (1984) outlined the Four-Preconditions Model of Sexual Abuse, upon which many subsequent models of child sexual abuse and the process of on- and off-line grooming have been based (Craven et al., 2006; Hall & Hirschman 1992; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, & Rogers, 2007; Sullivan, 2009; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Finkelhor's (1984) model involves the presence of four preconditions, in order for the abuse of a child to take place. Sullivan's (2009) Spiral of Sexual Abuse extended the core concepts outlined by the Preconditions (Finkelhor, 1984) and most notably created a visual depiction of the process, including 'brick walls', which offenders employ cognitive distortions and abuse supportive thinking to get over. Simplifying some of the terminology and visually representing an offender's progression from motivation to the actual sexual abuse of a child has contributed to the reasons why Sullivan's (2009) spiral is becoming widely used in policing communities and with sex offenders themselves.

Grooming is a key feature within both Finkelhor (1984) and Sullivan's (2009) models, but is a component within them, rather than the focus. In recent years the process of grooming and the significant influence it has on whether abuse does or does not take place, has led researchers to focus more extensively on this aspect. In response, Craven et al. (2006) generated a model of grooming. Within the model Craven et al. (2006) identified three types of grooming: grooming the self; grooming of the surroundings and significant others; and grooming the young person. Whilst each phase corresponds in some way to Finkelhor's (1984) preconditions (see Table 1), Craven et al. (2006) clarified the concepts and extracted their relevance specifically in relation to grooming. By using the term grooming in relation to 'the self', Craven et al. (2006) have highlighted the important commonality between the process an offender uses to prepare a child for abuse and the process they use to prepare themselves for carrying out the abuse.

Grooming the young person is perhaps the most widely acknowledged aspect of grooming and takes two different positions: physical and psychological (Craven et al., 2006). Each victim's experience of this stage will vary as it depends on the offender themselves and the adaptation of their strategy for the individual victim. Following interviews with sixteen sex offenders, Sullivan (2009) identified three primary functions of grooming (see Table 1) and found considerable overlap between these functions, as one piece of behaviour may perform dual functions; potentially addressing all three.

In summary, despite variations in grooming techniques, there are commonalities within the process. These include means of systematically desensitising the child until they are physically and psychologically groomed to the point where there is increased likelihood of their engagement in sexual activity. Throughout the grooming process, the young

person's inhibitions are lowered via active engagement, desensitisation, power and control, all of which involve the offender's manipulation of the child (Berson, 2003).

2.3.1. Manipulation

Whilst all characteristics of grooming involve some form of manipulation, it is important to outline exactly what manipulation may entail. Grooming is a heavily manipulative process and a young person may be coerced or threatened into behaving in ways uncharacteristic to that individual (Berson, 2003). Grooming may involve one or several of the following: bribery, gifts, money, flattery, sexualised games, force, and threats (Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995; McAlinden, 2006; Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2005; O'Connell, 2003; Ospina et al., 2010). Sullivan (2009) identifies a range of different manipulation styles adopted by offenders, to groom victims and individuals around them. These styles include integrity projection, suffering, insidious controlling, liberal thinking, overt manipulation and intimidation (Sullivan, 2009; Sullivan & Quayle 2012). The manipulation style adopted by the offender will depend on their personality, their circumstance and their victim. Offenders may use flattery as part of manipulation and grooming to make the young person feel special, this exploits their natural need to feel loved and cared for (Berliner & Conte, 1990). At the other end of the spectrum, an offender may use intimidation and fear as part of grooming, potentially utilising blackmail as a means of control. The variety of manipulation techniques serve to increase the offender's power and control (Ospina et al., 2010), ultimately 'hooking' the victim and increasing their dependency on the offender. Wolak et al.'s (2004) study reported that 77% of the communications offenders had with victims were in multiple ways (e.g. telephone, email, text message, etc). Such a manipulation technique of immersing the offender in the victim's

life increases the victim's reliance on them and the young person becomes highly accessible around the clock.

2.3.2. Accessibility

The accessibility of victims is a determining factor in whether or not an offender is likely to groom a child (Sullivan, 2009) and the internet provides a platform for individuals with a sexual interest in young people, to explore this in ways that were not possible 20 years ago. In the past, offenders most commonly abused those within their family, workplace, those in residential care or others known to them (Elliott et al., 1995; Finkelhor, 1997; Harkins & Dixon, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2005; Olson et al., 2007; Sullivan & Beech, 2002). However, this trend is changing as the popularity of the internet with young people has made them accessible to offenders to a much greater extent than previously. Offenders can access potential victims via the internet, without leaving their home and whilst maintaining relative anonymity by sharing a private virtual space (Berson, 2003; Briggs et al., 2011; Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, & Dickson, 2004; O'Connell, 2003). Extreme and potentially disruptive measures will not necessarily need to be employed by the offender, because online they can achieve "intimacy at arm's length" (Carr, 2004, p.2). Offenders who feel marginalised by society or face difficulties in the 'real world' may feel more capable and accepted online, where conventional structures are altered (Quayle & Taylor, 2002).

Accessibility is a key aspect in O'Connell's (2003) typology of online grooming, which highlights how technology has altered victimology on three levels; accessibility, opportunity and vulnerability. This typology was built upon linguistic details used in the grooming process during participant observation in chat rooms. Having identified a child, the groomer will proceed through the following stages: friendship forming, relationship forming, risk

assessment, exclusivity, and finally sexual and fantasy enactment (O'Connell, 2003). These stages mainly take place within the *grooming of the young person* phase of Craven et al.'s (2006) types of grooming, although the risk assessment stage could evolve to incorporate *grooming others and the environment* (Craven et al., 2006).

In the real world, parents are often cautious of those who come into contact with their children, however they are not as readily vigilant with such contacts online (O'Connell, 2003) and are often less involved in their child's life online (Davidson, Martellozzo, & Lorenz, 2009; Fleming, Greentree, Cocotti-Muller, Elias, & Morrison, 2006; Rosen, Cheever, & Carrier, 2008). Potential lack of parental supervision online, particularly if the internet connection is mobile or based in a child's bedroom, makes children much more accessible to offenders. A quarter of young people who use social networking sites report that they converse on the internet with others who are unconnected to their everyday life, this includes one fifth of 9 – 12 year old users (Livingstone, Olafsson, & Stakrud, 2011).

2.3.3. Rapport Building

The similarities between online grooming stages and the way in which legitimate online relationships are generally formed can make it challenging for a young person to identify sexual exploitation online (Bryce, 2010). Offenders must facilitate the victim's trusting of them in order for rapport and intimacy to be established (McAlinden, 2006; Olson et al., 2007). During a thematic analysis of chat room transcripts, Williams, Elliott and Beech (in submission) identified three themes with sub-themes that are reflected in grooming techniques (see Table 2). As part of rapport building an offender often synchronises their behaviour and style of communicating with the young person's, generating commonality and making them comfortable (Williams et al., in submission).

Furthermore, mutuality involves the offender learning about the young person's interests, beliefs and circumstance and the acceptance of these enabling a connection to be made (Williams et al., in submission). Results from the European Online Grooming Project (2012) suggest that instead of retrospectively learning about a victim's interests, the offender will actually choose to approach those with similar interests or life experiences to themselves. Some offenders even describe acting as a 'mentor' for the victim (European Online Grooming Project, 2012). Such a role may aid these offenders in their cognitive distortions; perceiving themselves as helping the victim. Offenders typically want to be perceived positively by the child, and may deliberately exhibit traits such as friendliness and being trustworthy (McAlinden, 2006; Ospina et al., 2010; Williams et al., in submission). Generally, an offender will attempt to make the relationship with the young person feel exclusive, not only does this make the child feel special, but distances them from potentially protective relationships (McAlinden, 2006), thus serving the 'grooming of the environment and significant others phase (Craven et al., 2006).

In contrast to O'Connell's (2003) linear stages of grooming, Williams et al. (in submission) suggest that offenders do not move through phases in any particular order. The European Online Grooming Project (2012) further supports this, describing grooming as cyclical, entailing an offender's adoption, maintenance, relapse and re-adoption of various phases over a period of time.

2.3.4. Sexual Context

Sexualising the communication with the young person is a key development within the grooming process; how and when this is introduced depends on the nature of the offender. The European Online Grooming Project (2012) identified 3 types of online

groomer; intimacy seeking, adaptable and hyper-sexualised. Those categorised as hyper-sexualised groomers are likely to introduce sexual context to the chat much more quickly, if not immediately (European Online Grooming Project, 2012). Sexual content is recognised as the second theme within Williams et al.'s (in submission) model (see Table 2) and its prominence in communication will increase with time. The escalation of sexual conversations is also recognised as part of O'Connell's (2003) boundary pushing and fantasy enactment phase. Sexualisation may take various forms including flirtation, dirty talking, sending sexual photos or links to pornographic materials (O'Connell, 2003; Ospina et al., 2010). Not only does this begin to normalise such behaviour, but the offender gains further control of the young person as they share things they would not want anyone else to know about (McAlinden, 2006). Subsequently, the offender has leverage with which to blackmail their victim. Repetition of sexual conversations is vital in assisting an offender to succeed. Offenders' methods of sexualisation and grooming can be divided into two different communication strategies; communicative desensitization and reframing (Olson et al., 2007). The first strategy verbally and physically desensitizes the young person until the point of sexual interaction and the second alters the child's sexuality, implying sex will be beneficial to them (Olson et al., 2007).

2.3.5. Risk Assessment

The offender's assessment of the risk associated with grooming a particular child is a key aspect of the grooming process and is reflected in the final theme outlined by Williams et al. (in submission) of the assessment of the child and environment. This mirrors O'Connell's (2003) 'Risk Assessment' stage, although Williams et al. (in submission) suggest it is a continual assessment, instead of a one off evaluation and this continuation not only

prevents detection, but also involves assessing the levels of trust and vulnerability. The European Online Grooming Project (2012) found risk management was exercised in three ways by offenders. Firstly, in relation to the forms of technology used and the logistics associated with them, for example some used multiple hardware, different IP addresses and various methods of storage and labelling. To further combat risk, the offenders refrained from communicating with their victims in public or open spaces, preferring the use of private email or mobile phones. The third form of risk management involved those who were meeting with victims face to face; meeting far from their home being a preference (European Online Grooming Project, 2012). In contrast to other research, the European Online Grooming Project (2012) noted that risk management was not utilised by all groomers, as some did not think they were doing anything wrong and therefore had nothing to hide. This is indicative of how powerful overcoming internal inhibitors (Finkelhor, 1984), getting over the brick wall (Sullivan, 2009) and self grooming (Craven et al., 2006) can be.

2.3.6. Deception

Grooming is a deceitful process whereby a young person is ill equipped to deduce warning signs (Berson, 2003). Identity is not fixed online, rather is a fluid entity, which can be continually changed and adjusted (Jewkes, 2010), this may increase the chance of a young person engaging with an offender as their suspicions are lowered. Deception often involves the offender masquerading as a young person (Palmer & Stacey, 2004). The nature of the online environment can be advantageous for this purpose. Deceiving young people online is a technique often adopted by offenders (O'Connell, 2003); however a common misconception is that all offenders who groom online will lie about their age and sexual intentions when conversing with victims. It is important to recognise this is not the case

(Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). In the majority of cases, young victims are aware of the fact they are communicating with adults online. In Wolak et al.'s (2004) study, it was noted that only 5% of offenders masqueraded as young people when they conversed with potential victims. Most offenders in this study informed the young people that they were adults seeking a sexual relationship. Sex is frequently discussed on the internet and most victims who meet offenders in person make the arrangement expecting to engage in a sexual relationship (Ybarra Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007). Many victims admit feelings of love for their offenders (Wolak et al., 2008). The fact that victims are frequently aware they are communicating with an adult and continue to take risks by engaging with them, is demonstrative of the intensity of the grooming process and the intensity of the victim's vulnerability driving them to the encounter. So what online and risk taking behaviours do young people demonstrate?

3. Young People Online

Online technologies have become an integral part of everyday life for many members of society; the average British person now spends approximately 30 hours a week online (National Audit Office, 2010). It is clear that our use of technology continues to increase and the ways in which we communicate are ever broadening. Young people of all ages are living in a technology saturated world and utilising online social networking, gaming sites and mobile technology like never before.

Following a summary of 400 European studies, Livingstone (2010) noted that the majority of children in prosperous countries across the globe, access the internet at home, school and elsewhere, for example in the UK more than 80% of 5 – 15 year olds access the

internet from their own home (Spielhofer, 2010) and 12% of 8-11 year olds and 31% of 12 – 15's now have internet access in their bedroom (Office of Communications [Ofcom], 2010).

Social networking websites such as Facebook, Bebo, Twitter and MySpace have increased in popularity; across Europe (including the UK), 38% of 9 - 12 year olds and 77% of 13 – 16 year olds have a social networking profile (Livingstone et al., 2011). Research indicates the number of users under the age of 18 continues to rise (Ofcom, 2010) not least because of the increasingly mobile and portable nature of the online environment (Spielhofer, 2010). Internet enabled mobile phones and games consoles, smart phones and i-pads have revolutionised the ease with which one can go online. As prices for portable devices continue to drop, an increasing number of young people have the freedom to access the internet from the palm of their hand, 24 hours a day. Almost 67% of parents across Europe report that their child aged 6 - 17 years has a mobile phone, increasing from 48% in 2005 -2006 (European Commission, 2008). UK research supports this trend, identifying that two in three children will have acquired a mobile phone by the time they are ten years old, whilst 71% of 8 – 11 year olds have a games console in their bedroom, many of which are internet enabled (Ofcom, 2010).

Across Europe use of the internet increases with age; from 42% of six year olds to 85% of 13 year olds and 87% of 17 year olds (European Commission, 2008). This information was obtained via parental interviews; therefore these figures may be a modest interpretation and/or reflect cultural variations. This underestimate by parents was exemplified in the UK when children reported they spend more than an hour a day online; exceeding parental predictions (Spielhofer, 2010). Older teenagers remain more likely to access the internet from their own computer at home (47% of 15-17 year olds compared to

22% of 6-10 year olds), from school (57% of 15-17 year olds compared with 49% of 6-10 year olds) and from a friend's house (32% of 15-17 year olds compared with 16% of 6-10 year olds) (European Commission, 2008). However, younger children (below 7 years) are increasingly accessing the internet from their home; 66% in 2009 up from 57% in 2008 in the UK (Spielhofer, 2010).

Young people's engagement with technology has thoroughly embedded online activities into their daily routines (Livingstone, 2010) adding to the convergence between the online and offline space. This is a key development surrounding internet usage (Palmer, von Weiler, & Loof, 2010) and will present an ever increasing risk to children (CEOP, 2010). It is no longer appropriate for professionals to divide social interaction into an online or a real world setting as, to young people, the environment distinction is inconsequential (CEOP, 2010). Young people have become 'digital natives' living in a technology immersed social world (Byron, 2008). However, while users scarcely distinguish between online and offline events, research demonstrates that the online world may cause us to act in unexpected ways, outside the realms of our normal characteristics.

4. Internet Behaviour

4.1. The Online Disinhibition Effect

The 'Online Disinhibition Effect' (Suler, 2004) highlights the difference in the way people communicate and behave online, compared to how they would in the real world. Suler (2004) identifies six factors that interact with each other to create this effect: 1. dissociative anonymity, 2. invisibility, 3. asynchronicity, 4. solipsistic introjections, 5. dissociative imagination and 6. minimisation of authority.

The first aspect is dissociative anonymity, which refers to one's sense of being unidentifiable online (e.g. through usernames and nicknames) and thus avoiding the obligation to 'own' one's behaviour. During interviews with online groomers as part of the European Online Grooming Project (2012), many noted that the perception of anonymity online gave them confidence and a 'buzz'. Secondly, physical invisibility online gives people the courage to act in ways that are dissimilar to their offline behaviour. This magnifies the disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). The effect's third aspect of asynchronicity outlines the lack of real time reactions on the internet. A message can be sent without a reaction for minutes, days or months. This can have a disinhibiting effect on users (Suler, 2004). 'Solipsistic introjections' refer to the sense that one's mind has become merged with the mind of person they are communicating with online. These introjections are explained by the online disinhibition effect as when online text is accompanied with a particular voice or image created by the reader. This makes the user feel merged with the writer of the text, consequentially disinhibiting them as they feel they are talking to themselves (Suler, 2004). The fifth aspect refers to dissociative imagination which describes the creation of online characters in one's imagination. This leads one to creating a fictional dimension separating offline 'fact' from online fantasy. Finally, the minimisation of authority refers to the fact that a person's level of authority or power offline is generally irrelevant online and users tend to start interactions as equal (Suler, 2004).

The 'Online Disinhibition Effect' works in two seemingly opposing directions; 'benign disinhibition' (revealing personal thoughts/emotions and unusual acts of kindness) or 'toxic disinhibition' (using anger, criticism or threatening behaviour) (Suler, 2004). Such behaviour is evident in young people's interactions online, whether sharing personal information and

trusting contacts online or by engaging in cyberbullying or contributing to harmful websites. The effect emphasises the impact of perceived anonymity and perceived invisibility online. Anonymity provides the opportunity to detach one's actions on the internet from one's lifestyle and identity offline, resulting in the online self becoming a more distant compartmentalised self (Suler, 2004). This not only assists offenders in distancing themselves from their actions and fuelling denial, but a young person who is engaging in risky behaviour online (by talking to strangers, communicating in a sexual way, performing sexual acts) may also use the anonymity to help justify their actions. Invisibility online gives people the courage to act in ways they would otherwise refrain from (Suler, 2004). You often cannot see others online thus consequentially ones actions are met by delayed reactions. Generally online, it is more difficult to gauge an immediate emotional response such as disapproval, embarrassment or anger. This perceived invisibility aids the offender in their cognitive distortions and increases the likelihood that a young person may engage with them in ways uncharacteristic of that individual.

This effect was exemplified during Berson's (2000) research where young people articulated how they often acted differently online and felt distant from their online behaviour (Berson, 2000). However, the increasingly converged online and offline environments may result in fewer young people consciously acknowledging this.

4.2. The Proteus Effect

Some studies have extended the concept of 'Online Disinhibition' (Suler, 2004) to examine what factors may trigger someone to behave differently online. The 'Proteus Effect' (Yee & Bailenson, 2007) demonstrates that as we change our self-representations online, our behaviour changes. In a study based on Snyder, Tanke and Berscheid (1977), Yee

and Bailenson (2007) assigned participants to avatars (a graphical representation of the user on a computer) which were rated on a scale of attractiveness. In a virtual environment, participants were then asked to interact (via their assigned avatar) with a confederate of the opposite gender. Two measures were used to assess the effects: 1. an interpersonal distance measure which tracked the distance between the participant's avatar and that of the confederate and 2. A self disclosure measure which tracked the volume of information given to the confederates by the participants, during the conversation. Results showed that those with more attractive avatars were more intimate with confederates in both measures one and two, when compared with participants allocated to less attractive avatars. Therefore, the level of avatar attractiveness effected how intimate participants were prepared to be with a stranger. Height of avatars also effected confidence levels of participants, with taller avatars displaying more confidence. This study is consistent with previous research in the offline environment which implies that attractive individuals have more confidence (Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam, & Smoot, 2000) and can make a close interpersonal distance socially advantageous (Burgoon, Walther, Baesler, & James, 1992). Similarly, taller individuals are perceived as more competent offline (Young & French, 1996).

This study demonstrates the effect online representations can have on our behaviour. With few boundaries and often minimal supervision, adolescents in particular often assume different identities online (Berson, 2000), which, in accordance with the Proteus Effect, may influence their behaviour. Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2002) found 14% of respondents in a national sample of youth internet users reported close relationships online with people unknown to them offline. These relationships may well

have been with other young people, however this portrays how young people communicate online with those unknown to them in the real world. Noll, Shenk, Barnes and Putnam, (2009) researched how participant's choices of avatars in a laboratory, correlate with adolescent choices and risky behaviour on the internet. Results from this study demonstrated that young people who make provocative body and clothing choices with their online avatars, are more likely to have had experienced online sexual communications. This is not restricted to avatars. It was found that with young girls in particular, self presentations online (e.g. a collection of pictures, narrative descriptions) may also increase their vulnerability towards being groomed on the internet (Noll et al., 2009).

4.3. Risk Taking

As outlined by *benign disinhibition* and *toxic disinhibition* in the 'Online Disinhibition Effect' people may act differently online than they would in the real world (Suler, 2004). This often leads to young people engaging in risk taking behaviour online which is one of the most worrying and significant trends (CEOP, 2010). As part of a study, patterns of risk taking were outlined by assessing nine internet behaviours that could be interpreted as risky for young people to utilize (Ybarra, et al. 2007). The more types of risky behaviours a young person demonstrated, the more likely they were to experience online interpersonal victimisation. Young people who engaged in 4 types of behaviours were 11 times more likely to report online interpersonal victimisation (Ybarra et al., 2007). Among young internet users, results indicated that meeting people online in numerous ways, discussing sex with strangers and having multiple unknown people in a friend's list are all related to significantly higher chances of interpersonal victimisation on the internet (Ybarra et al., 2007).

Yet, despite being aware of what risk taking behaviour entails, young people often engage in these behaviours online (Mishna et al., 2009). In a survey of Dutch young people, Peter, Valkenburg and Schouten (2006), found that the more frequently young people communicate online, the less often they chat to strangers. However, those who were online for more intensive periods (defined by responses on a four point scale, where four was considered to be intensive, representing conversations of about 2 hours or more), talked more frequently with strangers than those who's communication online was less intensive (Peter et al., 2006). The authors identified five reasons why a young person may talk to strangers online: 1) entertainment; 2) social inclusion; 3) maintaining relationships; 4) meeting new people; and 5) social compensation. The findings from this study indicate that the most likely causes of an adolescent communicating with strangers on the internet are boredom, curiosity and inhibition (Peter et al., 2006). This implies that, given a certain mood, any young person may engage with strangers online, however, the research did not explore what proportion of these interactions led to sexual solicitations. It should be noted that many young people do not consider people that they speak to online and have never met, as 'strangers' and would not necessarily perceive this to be risk taking behaviour (Davidson et al., 2009; Mishna et al., 2009). Unfortunately, this sense of security and trust induces greater risk for the young person.

In Leander, Christianson and Granhag's (2008) research involving 68 adolescent girls who had been victimised online and offline by one offender, 25% of victims engaged in stripping or masturbating on webcam. Furthermore, 40% sent nude photos and the majority sent personal information. However, it is unclear from the research what

percentage was a consequence of the offender's grooming and what was the young people independently engaging in risk taking behaviour.

Overall, therefore, it appears that online victimisation is linked to behaviours that raise risk, such as communicating with unknown people online, sharing personal information with unknown people online, meeting up with online friends in the real world and talking about sex online (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007; Young, Young, & Fullwood, 2007). This is supported by the finding that sex offenders report three main factors that would lead them to target a child, 1. a minor mentioning sex in any manner online (e.g. on their profile); 2. if the child appeared needy or submissive; and 3. if the child's screen name was young sounding (e.g. Jenny13, Sarah2001 etc.; Malesky, 2007). Thus, research is beginning to look at whether some young people are particularly vulnerable.

Atkinson and Newton (2010) adapted a concept originally put forward by Livingstone and Bober (2005) for *Children and the Net* (2006) identifying four main groups of young people online (Table 3). The conceptual model highlights the significance of young people's risk taking behaviour online, with the 'inexperienced risk takers' being the group of most concern (Atkinson & Newton, 2010). This model emphasises the importance of a young person's frequency of internet use in contributing to which category a young person falls. Peter et al. (2006) also highlighted the link between the amount of time spent online and talking to strangers; however, as discussed above this link was not a simple correlation between time spent online and likelihood of communicating with strangers, instead it was dependent on intensity as well as frequency. Furthermore, Peter et al.'s (2006) research found strong links between age and talking to strangers online, whereby younger

adolescents (12-14 years) were more likely to converse with strangers. This is not considered in Atkinson and Newton's (2010) model.

Following focus groups with young people, the European Online Grooming Project (2012) identified 3 responses of young people online, 1) resilient 2) risk takers 3) vulnerable. The authors found the majority of young people to be resilient, therefore comparable to frequent users (skilled risk takers or all-round experts) within Atkinson and Newton's (2010) research. However, resilience according to the European Online Grooming Project (2012) does not imply anything about the frequency of the young person's use of the internet. This resilience was demonstrated in a US study which found that out of the young people who received a sexual solicitation on MySpace, nearly all reacted appropriately by blocking, ignoring or reporting the incident (Rosen et al., 2008). Whilst Atkinson and Newton's (2010) typologies refer to all risky behaviour online, Peter et al.'s (2006) and the European Online Grooming Project (2012) refer only to contact with strangers online. The applicability of these models has yet to be tested in research; however the concepts could potentially be used to better target education campaigns. The concern surrounding young people's risk taking behaviour online has led to preventative education techniques in attempt to reduce the harm.

5. Prevention Measures

As part of their follow-up study, Wolak et al. (2006) stipulated that the fluidity of the online environment has a positive impact on internet safety education, as many of the risky behaviours utilised by young people online are not yet ingrained in their internet culture. Preventative measures to protect young people on the internet have included: laws prohibiting illegitimate activity online and privacy protection; implementation of Acceptable

Use Policies in schools providing rules for internet access; family guidelines and parental supervision; application of software to filter, block and monitor access to unsuitable websites; and internet safety education for young people (Berson, 2003). Focus has largely been around awareness campaigns in the classroom intended to educate children, parents and teachers about the risks of online grooming (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2008). There are a range of resources from various agencies across the globe aiming help educate young people about the risks online (Ospina et al., 2010). Among the widest reaching in the UK is CEOP's 'Thinkuknow' education programme which, among other issues tackles online grooming. Over 8 million children in the UK have engaged with the programme and 70,000 professionals are registered to deliver the content (CEOP, 2011). However, currently it is not clear whether the young people engaging in risk taking behaviour online have received internet safety education and furthermore if the education is effective (Wells & Mitchell, 2008).

During a review of CEOP's Thinkuknow programme, Davidson et al. (2009) found that a young person's recall of internet safety messages seems to weaken as time progresses, thus highlighting the need for consistent and frequent educational messages. Following research into victimisation through various online technologies, Ybarra and Mitchell (2008) suggest that preventative education may be more effective if it were to focus on the psychosocial issues impacting young people, rather than use of a specific online application. Due to the fact that the majority of research surrounding online grooming has focused on offenders' accounts, consequentially most education campaigns have been informed by such. To bring the perspective of a young victim of online grooming to this field could be invaluable for education programmes.

6. Conclusion

It is clear that young people are accessing technology like never before and offenders are utilising this shared environment to build relationships with them. Having outlined the key aspects involved in online grooming, it is not yet clear how these interact with young people's behaviour online. In particular the implications of accessibility and young people's risk taking behaviour need further investigation. If an offender casts their net wide online (i.e., targets all young people), will it be the most vulnerable young people who take the bait (respond to the communication)? If so, what makes these particular young people vulnerable? This is a key question that needs to be addressed in order to effectively target interventions, see *[names removed for masked review, in submission]*. Prevention techniques are more commonly being endorsed by professionals with a view to protecting young people online, however further research is required to assess the effectiveness of such. The internet is a pivotal feature of modern society and therefore it is only right that research continues to explore this area to offer young people the best possible protection online. There is a need to develop a greater understanding of the dynamics of victim-offender interactions (Bryce, 2010) and given the relative lack of research from a victim's perspective, future research should incorporate this key stance. Such a perspective may offer valuable insights into the characteristics of online grooming and better inform professionals working in this area.

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Conflict of Interest statement

There are no conflicts of interest with other people or organisations that could inappropriately influence, or be perceived to influence this work.

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Table 1.

Comparison of Models of Grooming

| | Finkelhor (1984) | Sullivan (2009) | Craven et al. (2006) |
|-----------------|------------------------------------|--|---|
| | Preconditions | Spiral of Abuse | Stages of Grooming |
| Internal | Motivation to sexually abuse | Motivation to sexually abuse | |
| | Overcoming internal inhibitors | Overcoming guilt/fear Fantasy and Masturbation | Self grooming |
| | Overcoming external inhibitors | Grooming the child and others/victim selection | Grooming the environment and significant others |
| External | | Creating opportunity with victim and others | |
| | Overcoming resistance of the child | Manipulating the perception of victim and others | Grooming of the child |
| | | Preventing discovery and disclosure of victim and others | |

Table 2.

Summary of Themes and Subthemes of Grooming identified by Williams, Elliott and Beech (In Submission)

| Themes | Sub-ordinate Themes |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| Rapport Building | Coordination |
| | Mutuality |
| | Positivity |
| Sexual Content | Introduction |
| | Maintenance / Escalation |
| Assessment | Of Child |
| | Of Environment |

Table 3.

Four main groups of young people online (Atkinson & Newton, 2010)

| Use/Risk Matrix | Infrequent Use | Frequent Use |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Low Risk Taking | Low risk novices | All round experts |
| High Risk Taking | Inexperienced risk takers | Skilled risk takers |